

The Impact of Sensitive Research on the Researcher: Preparedness and Positionality

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Abstract

There is currently limited research exploring the impact of undertaking sensitive or challenging research on the researcher, although some textbooks explore researcher preparedness. This article presents a discussion of the findings from a research project which engaged with the seldom heard voices of researchers themselves. The aim was to explore researchers' experiences of undertaking research on sensitive topics, or with marginalized groups, as this can expose researchers to emotionally disturbing situations throughout data collection and analysis, which can be psychologically challenging. Although ethical codes of practice include discussion around protection of both the researcher and the participant, in practice, the ethics approval process rarely considers the impact of the proposed research on the researcher. Their experiences are therefore seldom acknowledged or heard, resulting in potential distress for the researcher. Semistructured interviews were undertaken with social science researchers from a range of discipline backgrounds and at different points in their research careers ($n = 10$). This article explores two themes emerging from the data: preparedness and positionality. It considers what these themes mean in terms of supporting researchers who encounter challenging research data, and issues related to supporting researcher reflexivity and the requirements for institutional support offered to researchers will also be considered.

Keywords

sensitive topics, reflexivity, positionality, preparedness

Introduction

This article presents a discussion of a project exploring researchers' experiences when undertaking research on sensitive topics within health and social sciences or with marginalized groups. The fields of health and social science research regularly deal with sensitive issues, and our interest in this topic grew from our own experiences as researchers undertaking qualitative research in a range of areas including faith and abuse, sex work, bereavement, disability, domestic violence, criminal justice, as well as through the experience of ethics review processes. This includes reflection on the impact of having undertaken research on sensitive topics and/or marginalized groups and our own emotional responses including feelings of "preparedness" for undertaking research in these areas. Despite qualitative research being described as "emotional labor," there has been little exploration into the impact of qualitative research on the researcher (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009, p. 61). This led us to consider the emotional safety of researchers carrying out qualitative

research (Pio & Singh, 2016), their preparedness for the task, and the support available to them.

The project was underpinned by a focus on two key areas: the emotional impact on those undertaking research on sensitive topics and the challenges encountered when trying to honor marginalized voices through the accurate and truthful representation of voice, while dealing with the power disparities inherent in the researcher-and-researched relationship (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). These concerns are linked to researcher rights to interpret and represent data, questions

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about whose voice is represented, and concerns about whether research can “reinforce the very systems of oppression it seeks to address” (Ashby, 2011, para. 11). These types of dilemma can prove troubling for researchers and may be compounded by lack of support to enable researchers to explore or share such concerns. Research with marginalized groups or sensitive topics may therefore put researchers in emotionally disturbing situations as well as into ethical dilemmas linked to power, ownership, and voice (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000; Fenge, 2010). Although positionality and preparedness are sometimes covered by qualitative methods books, there is a need for more extensive understanding of this experience, alongside consideration of the role of higher education institutions (HRIs) in supporting research staff at all levels.

In this article, we explore background literature of the topic, before considering two major themes arising from the project: positionality and preparedness. Finally, we discuss what these findings mean in terms of the emotional support needs of researchers at different stages of their research careers and the role of the academy in supporting researchers.

Background Literature

Researcher self-efficacy has been linked to their confidence in successfully performing tasks associated with conducting research (Forester, Kahn, & Hesson-McInnis, 2004). However, it may be more difficult to manage or plan for the unknown emotional tasks when the researcher comes into contact with challenging data within the research process (Brougham & Utterly, 2017; Drake & Harvey, 2014). Craig, Corden, and Thornton (2000) highlight that psychological trauma can be experienced by researchers through their exposure to challenging material or situations and that support should be offered to support researcher well-being and enable reflection. Although there is growing concern about researcher safety in general within the literature in terms of physical safety, management, and risk (Parker & O'Reilly, 2013), less attention has been given to the risks posed by psychological trauma or the responsibility of employers to provide support.

It is established practice for research ethics committees (RECs) to undertake risk assessment relating to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of participants (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2019; Gelling, 1999). Many institutions already have separate systems for undertaking risk assessment for employees, and it would be logical that mental and emotional well-being, as well as physical well-being, should also be considered as part of this process. The concern is that neither institutional risk assessment nor ethics review is adequately addressing the psychological well-being of researchers. RECs duty of care toward researchers is mainly limited to the prospective guidance of researchers on identifying potential risks of harm and putting mechanisms in place to mitigate these risks prior to fieldwork. It has been suggested that rather than just dealing with formal review of risk, there is potential for ethics review to encourage ongoing researcher reflexivity to “enable researchers to engage with

the complex ethical issues that they may be forced to face” (Rowley, 2014, p. 23). However, there needs to be more scholarly debate about the duty of care of HEIs, research supervisors, and RECs in terms of supporting researchers' emotional well-being. This may include consideration of the remit of ethics review, concerns about unnecessarily paternalistic processes (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008), and the duty of care of HEIs for the emotional well-being of researchers through improved supervision and mentoring.

Undertaking qualitative research is an embodied experience which may affect researchers emotionally (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Listening to challenging narratives, alongside dealing with issues of social justice, can make researchers feel vulnerable (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011; Raheim et al., 2016). Researchers may encounter ongoing emotional challenges as they confront issues of social justice, inequality, and powerlessness, resulting in a range of emotions including sadness, anger, guilt, fear, helplessness, and depletion (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwala, 2014; Pio & Singh, 2016). While there is some discussion in the literature around protecting those within marginalized groups as research participants (L. J. Smith, 2008; Wilson & Neville, 2014), there is less published work considering the impact on researchers working with potentially disturbing data.

Within qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge that researcher “subjectivity and positionality” can influence the interaction with research participants, and the emotional experience of the researcher and the interpretive lens they use (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Dean, 2017). For example, some researchers in the field of child abuse experience challenging auditory and visual sensations while listening to the children's accounts (Jackson, Backett-Milburn, & Newall, 2013). Some HEIs offer researchers involved in sensitive topic research opportunities for therapeutic support (Corden, Sainsbury, Sloper, & Ward, 2005), and there is recognition that the process of transcribing disturbing or sensitive data may require specific support due to the risk of secondary distress (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016). It is interesting to note that journalists who work with traumatic news stories have recognized that their work can cause emotional distress and post-traumatic stress (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). However, there is no consistent recognition that researchers undertaking work on similarly challenging or sensitive topics may experience emotional challenges. It is therefore important to focus on researcher care within qualitative research and the emotional impact undertaking such research can have upon the researcher (Pio & Singh, 2016).

Issues related to social justice and inequality may also prove to be challenging for researchers, and these challenges are similar to those faced by social workers and aid workers (Dunkley, 2015). Milner (2007, p. 388) identified unforeseen risks posed to researchers undertaking research with minority ethnic groups “when they do not pay careful attention to their own and others' racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world.” It is important

that researchers critically reflect upon “the self” in relation to the communities and people involved in their research. This includes adopting a reflexive stance toward their power or positionality in relation to this, and any potential challenges this poses to them in terms of their role as researcher.

Positionality relates to an acknowledgment of the multiple roles and positions that researchers and research participants bring to the research process. A process of critically reflecting upon “the self” can develop increased insight into how multiple aspects of identity exert an influence on the research we undertake. Researchers can sharpen their appreciation of the structural influences on their research practice through “socioanalysis” (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 116), which can support reflexivity and sharpen critical thinking (Moon, 2007). Through deeper critical reflection upon the research process, researchers may gain deeper insight into their impact on the research and research participant, and how the research process impacts on them. This may be particularly pertinent for those who undertake research on sensitive or challenging topics such as abuse, intimate partner violence, and grief. Positionality has clear links to notions of power and privilege, and in turn, this can relate to insider–outsider perspectives linked to the researchers’ relationship to the specific topic or community (Collins, 1999). Other researchers have suggested that there are no clear-cut distinctions between “insider–outsider” perspectives, but rather there is a continuum on which this positionality lies, which is also influenced by context (Christensen & Dahl, 1997; Surra & Ridley, 1991). It may therefore be more helpful to consider “the dynamic rhythms of multi-positionality” (Ryan, 2015, p. 2).

The background, age, and life experience of researchers influence how encountering challenging data will impact upon them (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Kennedy, Hicks, & Yarker, 2013). Investigations into student researchers suggest that they can experience a range of insecurities about preparedness to conduct sensitive research, and as a result, it is important for them to have access to quality academic supervision (Simpson & Wilson-Smith, 2017). However, unlike research students, academic researchers rarely receive research supervision or peer support to deal with the psychological and/or ethical challenges encountered through disturbing narratives and data. Developing a reflexive stance may support researchers to develop “self-care” when working with disturbing data (Fahie, 2014).

Qualitative researchers may encounter challenging situations or disturbing data throughout their research around sensitive topics or with marginalized groups. To date, little research has explored this issue across a range of social science disciplines or with researchers at different points of their research careers. This study aims to address this gap in knowledge by focusing on researchers undertaking research across a number of different contexts including sex work, faith and abuse, disability, domestic violence, and criminal justice and considers the experience of early career researchers (ECRs) and experienced researchers.

Method

This project set out to elicit insights from researchers working with sensitive topics or challenging data. We used a qualitative approach to explore their experiences using semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study obtained ethical approval from Bournemouth University Social Science and Humanities Research Ethics Panel in 2018. As the participants we interviewed were engaged as researchers working in sensitive topics, we were mindful of the need to protect both the participant researchers and in turn their own research participants from harm. It was therefore important to ensure confidentiality and privacy for the research participants and their areas of research. This was achieved by ensuring anonymity within the research process and by adopting a number system from 1 to 10 in the recording and transcription of data.

Research Participants

This was an exploratory study that aimed to provide a basis for further research. A purposeful sample of $n = 10$ participants were recruited to represent researchers from across a range of social science topic areas. A key inclusion criterion was to represent a range of research experience to include ECRs and experienced researchers, and we were mindful to include participants from different disciplinary backgrounds, researching different topics, and with different levels of experience in conducting research. Although there is no one definition for what an ECR is, and the literature in this area variously describes a time frame of consideration from 5 to 10 years postdoctoral award (Locke, Freeman, & Rose, 2018), we view ECRs in our sample as being between 0 and 9 years postdoctorate. Using these criteria our sample includes five ECRs (up to 9 years postdoc) and five experienced researchers (10 years plus postdoc). Participants were recruited through e-mail correspondence and through contact with specific research topic hubs. Eight interviews were undertaken via Skype, and two took place as face-to-face interviews. Table 1 details the participants recruited, illustrating topic area and stage of career and length of experience as a researcher.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage model of thematic analysis. We reviewed emerging themes as a research team and discussed the findings, analysis and themes identifying five superordinate themes.

These were preparedness, power, and privilege; researcher as an agent of change, voice, or voicelessness; and positionality of the researcher. This article will focus on the themes of preparedness and positionality of the researcher. The other themes will be published in further papers.

Table 1. Research Participant Details.

Research Participant Number	Topic Area	Stage of Career	Length of Time Researching Sensitive Issues
1	Sex work	Postdoc	10 Years (experienced researchers)
2	Child abuse linked to faith or belief gambling addiction	Final year PhD	7 Years (ECR)
3	Family violence	Professor	18 Years (experienced researcher)
4	Domestic abuse, fostering and adoption and gender in faith-based communities	Final year PhD	3 Years (ECR)
5	Sex work regulation	Senior lecturer (no PhD)	10 Years (experienced researcher)
6	Sociology of religion—gender and sexuality	Senior lecturer (with PhD)	14 Years (experienced researcher)
7	Disability and sexual well-being	Postdoc	7 Years (ECR)
8	Financial scamming Health care	Former senior lecturer (with PhD) now left academia	20 Years (experienced researcher)
9	Sex offenders in the criminal justice system	Final year PhD	5 Years (ECR)
10.	Spirituality and trauma	Lecturer (PhD)	8 Years (ECR)

Note. ECR = early career researcher; PhD = doctor of philosophy.

Preparedness

This theme concerns how researchers experience a lack of preparedness when they encounter challenging data and their thoughts of how they could be supported to be better prepared.

Lack of Preparedness

Many of the researchers in this sample had little preparation in dealing with the challenging topics and situations they found themselves in. This was particularly acute for those ECRs:

I've not had any training on how to deal with people with mental health issues, or people specifically that are vulnerable. I've not had any of that training, yet I'm going in and asking these people really very sensitive questions. (P2, L690–L692)

Those with more research experience were not immune from feeling unprepared for the emotional responses they encountered, and they highlight how ethics review processes do not recognize the unpredictable nature of conducting sensitive research or the support needs of researchers working with challenging data. The “unpredictable” aspect of encountering emotionally upsetting information during research interviews is something that ethics review does not cover. Although ethics review considers mechanisms to support research participants who may become upset as a result of a research interview, it rarely considers similar mechanisms of support for researchers who may experience emotional distress as researchers encountering challenging topics.

You have all these consent forms and all these ethics and blah blah blah, but in the process of research, who's actually there, to talk to you? (P1, L486–L487)

So these are some of the unpredictable natures that emerge through research that no ethics form will ever capture or prepare for P3 (L472–L473)

Experienced researchers may be expected to have more resilience to deal with the emotional demands of undertaking sensitive research, yet several experienced researchers in our sample describe being taken by surprise at the emotional response to their research.

I felt like I needed support after a difficult interview but I was on my own as an experienced researcher P10 (L100–L102)

I think what affected me as I left was that I don't think I'd expected it to be involving sexual abuse . . . ; The one that really affected me the most was how she'd normalised the violence in her life, and normalised the fact that she would end up dead within the next 2 years P3 (L135–L137)

The following week more women wanted to talk to me, and I said to the refuge staff “actually I'm finding this quite emotionally difficult and I didn't anticipate this” because I'd already worked in the area for 10 years. (P2, L127–L129)

Being Prepared

Researchers in our sample reflected upon a range of mechanisms that could better support those engaged in sensitive research. Some of these responses involve individual approaches to build reflexivity and resilience and others identify organizational requirements for better support. A key element of preparation is to be aware that engaging with such research may elicit emotional responses. This requires a degree of reflection on the part of the researcher and an ability to be aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and trigger points.

It's no good somebody . . . not understanding what it really might involve and the stories they're going to hear P7 (L518–L519)

An ECR noted the importance of being made aware of the emotional aspect of encountering disturbing data, and the need for support to be provided by supervisors.

So “you might get upset when you are doing this, just be aware” P9 (L242)

The researcher needs to do a little bit of self-reflection before they start, and make sure that they’re in a good place to carry it out I don’t think it’s necessarily the right subject for everyone P3 (L447–L44)

An experienced researcher detailed how she balanced the limitations of ethics review by ensuring that she robustly considers all potential elements involved in the research.

... So when I’m putting together my ethics form I’m very self-critical of it... the ethics committee will do their jobs, but perhaps they don’t know my subject area as well as me, therefore I like to leave no stone unturned P3 (L104–L105)

Alongside the ability of individual researchers developing their own personal resilience to cope with disturbing data, another key element identified involves the need of institutions to provide better training and support for researchers engaged in sensitive research.

I think it should definitely be on PhD curriculums... I think there needs to be a dedicated session to researching sensitive issues P6 (L676–L678)

They must have a place where they can debrief, it’s unacceptable that somebody hears really distressing stories and then doesn’t know where to put that P7 (L511–L513)

You need support all the way through the research process—however experienced you are P10 (L111–L112)

There could be networks within institutions and between institutions that talk about these specific issues P2 (L617–L618)

Positionality

An interesting discussion by some of the researchers concerned aspects of identity and how this can exert an influence on the research process. This concerned the ability of researchers to reflect upon their roles and identities and sometimes the duality involved in their identities “trying to find your role as an academic, as a researcher, as an activist, and all of that” P1 (L112). This is particularly true for researchers who have previous professional backgrounds such as social worker or counselor and those that may have dual roles as support workers while undertaking PhD studies.

I wasn’t there to provide professional advice or guidance... I had a researcher’s hat on, not a social worker’s P7 (L426–L442)

I’m representing the establishment. I’m an individual researcher but I’m representing a system, a structure P4 (L243)

Positionality concerns the ways in which researchers make sense of their roles and the boundaries involved in the researcher–participant relationship in sensitive research. Some researchers see clear boundaries around the research role and what this involves and suggest that “no way should a qualitative interview with vulnerable people on a sensitive topic drift

into a therapy session” P8 (L222–L223). However, others negotiated their positionality differently with more blurring of boundaries.

It’s more of a counselling type relationship P9 (L103–L104)

When you are doing research you can’t just swap your hat and say—yesterday I was your support but today I am your researcher; you can’t have split heads P8 (L84–L85)

Positionality also involves negotiation of insider–outsider perspectives linked to the researchers’ relationship to the specific topic or community and where they locate themselves on this continuum. This also involves how much of their “position” or identity they share with their participants.

I’m a member of that community myself, so I’ve had to do a lot of negotiation, more than I have with other research when you have a little bit of distance P3 (L23–L24)

I would never have got such rich data if I hadn’t been able to say I shared the experience P10 (L99–L101)

There is evidence that researchers critically reflect upon themselves in relation to the communities and people involved in their research, and the challenges this presents in terms of their researcher role. This concerns an awareness of issues of the power and inequality between the researcher role and the individuals and communities they work with.

As a white female researching an issue that was specifically about Nigerian males living in the UK, obviously that presented certain issues around race, culture, colonialism, whiteness, critical race theory, all those kind of things P2 (L72–L74)

Discussion

This project sets out to explore the emotional impact on researchers of undertaking research on sensitive topics and the challenges encountered in terms of their positionality when working with marginalized voices. Researcher preparedness emerged as a key factor for both ECRs and experienced researchers. Researchers commented upon having little preparation in dealing with the challenging topics and situations they encountered and was particularly acute for ECRs. This echoes findings from the wider literature which suggest that it is difficult to manage or plan for the unknown emotional tasks when dealing with challenging research process (Brougham & Utterly, 2017; Drake & Harvey, 2014).

Lack of preparedness was linked to a perceived lack of training and support offered to researchers, either as part of doctoral studies or as an ongoing support mechanism where there are opportunities to reflect on the challenges within a supportive and safe space. This may be particularly pertinent for ECRs as they may have less resilience to deal with some of the challenges (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Kennedy et al., 2013). Research with student researchers suggests that quality academic supervision is essential in supporting them to cope with

the emotional demands of research (Simpson & Wilson-Smith, 2017). Researchers in our study reiterate that supervision and support mechanisms, which enable them to safely reflect upon their experiences, are valuable across all stages of the research career. Being supported to develop a reflexive stance may therefore support researchers' "self-care" and increase resilience when working with disturbing data (Fahie, 2014). It is also important to challenge the assumption that experienced researchers have increased resilience to deal with challenging data. Several of the experienced researchers recounted being unexpectedly emotionally affected during the research process while having no available mechanisms to share their experiences. It is therefore important that professors are aware of the support needs of their staff and students as well as their own "self-care" needs when undertaking research on sensitive topics. It has been suggested that supervision outside of the university setting may offer a safe reflective space for researchers engaged in sensitive topic research (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001).

There may be a role for RECs to offer further consideration of the potential impact on the researcher within the ethics review process. In the same way that RECs consider prevention of harm to research participants and signposting appropriate support, it may be important to offer a similar level of care to researchers engaged in sensitive topic research. This may be done by the RECs or via another system of institutional risk management. The Social Research Association (SRA, 2001, p. 1) Code of Practice for social researcher safety identifies that "researchers can be at risk of psychological trauma . . . through the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction." What is less clear in the Code is how researchers may be supported to minimize the risks posed by vicarious trauma and the responsibility to employers to provide appropriate support. The specific nature of this type of risk may not be recognized by institutions within any of their systems, either because this particular duty of care is not clearly acknowledged within the organization or because there is confusion where responsibility lies for evaluating risk and providing support, in this context. There is a second element to this concerning supervision: where the duty of care for an individual rests with their research supervisor for doctoral students and where a duty of care rests within the employing institution. Research participants do not have a guardian within the institution; this is why RECs, in effect, take on that role. Employees (researchers) do have a guardian; their employer has a duty of care toward them (SRA, 2001, p. 1). There is a fine balance between an organization, such as RECs, taking over part of that responsibility, as opposed to providing advice for the researcher and their supervisor in order to facilitate the duty of care. Further academic research about the duty of care of HEIs and the role and remit of ethics review processes needs to be undertaken in respect of supporting researcher emotional well-being.

Moving forward, it would be useful to research how different mechanisms may be developed to support researchers across the research life cycle. Options for peer-to-peer supervision, or as one participant suggested "networks within

institutions and between institutions that talk about these specific issues" could be evaluated in the future, and such support could be equally useful to social science researchers as well those from backgrounds such as media and journalism, where there is recognition that working on traumatic news stories can cause emotional distress (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). As one of the research participants in this study commented "really any subject can be sensitive, what about journalism and photography at traumatic events" P10 (L13–L14).

Identity was a key theme raised by participants in this study and specifically pivots around researcher positionality and how this can influence the research process. Feedback from participants in this study indicates that researcher positionality involves recognition of the multiple roles and identities that they bring to the research process, including their backgrounds, relationship to the topic under study, experience, and previous professional status (Christensen & Dahl, 1997; Surra & Ridley, 1991). This may involve the researcher reflecting on their own "position" in negotiating their role as "an academic, as a researcher, as an activist, and all of that" P1 (112). The need to negotiate positionality within research processes is illustrated by a study with nurse researchers into family caregiving roles (Cartwright & Limandri, 1997). Although emerging from specific nursing research, the study highlights the role of different relationships between researchers and participants including stranger–stranger, researcher–participant, friend–friend, nurse–client, and guest–host (Cartwright & Limandri, 1997, p. 225). This confirms the fluidity of multipositionalities which are negotiated by researcher and participant during the research process (Ryan, 2015, p. 2).

When exploring the dilemmas associated with positionality and social justice, it may be useful to look at cognate disciplines, where upholding a social justice approach to practice is an everyday challenge, such as in social work. Although the task of intervention is clearer for social workers, in terms of upholding an antidiscriminatory and anti-oppressive stance within practice, they are often faced with similar dilemmas about their agency in supporting marginalized groups. Social workers are supported to consider these dilemmas through reflective and reflexive conversations through professional supervision (Beddoe, 2010). Appropriate supervision and support for ECRs has been found to be important in helping to prevent emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016), and a recent study in Estonia suggests that peer mentors can be an important source of support for ECRs (Eigi, Velbaum, Lõhkivi, Simm, & Kokkov, 2018). Peer mentoring or group supervision could hold potential for researchers to explore the dynamics of power within the research process and their positionality in relation to dominant discourse (Hair, 2015).

It is interesting to reflect on whether lessons learnt from the support offered across the caring professions could be applied to researchers undertaking sensitive research. Group supervision is a common approach within health and social care practice, used in nursing, counseling, and social work settings to support staff to reflect upon their practice and to learn from their peers (Arvidson, Lofgren, & Fridlund, 2001; Bransford,

2009). Globally, qualitative researchers are encountering challenging data, and there may be potential to develop international networks of support. This may be particularly useful for researchers in institutions where there is currently no support, offering opportunities for researchers within a wider community of practice (Wenger, 2000).

Limitations

This project has considered a little researched area of the impact of undertaking sensitive or challenging research on researchers. The exploratory nature of this research has highlighted directions for future research on the topic. As this was a small exploratory study, the sample size was limited, although we did include ECRs (0–9 years) and experienced researchers (10 years plus).

The selection of questions for the semistructured interviews was informed by the available literature. As the research grew out of the authors' own experiences of sensitive research, we are aware that the study may be shaped by our own "insider" perspectives and the choice of interview questions. To counteract potential researcher bias, we used investigator triangulation while conducting the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, which brought together the perspectives of the three authors to add breadth to the study and a degree of reflexivity onto the topic (Denzin, 1978).

Conclusions

This study set out to explore qualitative researchers' experiences of conducting research into sensitive topics or with marginalized groups. This article explored two key themes related to researcher preparedness and positionality. These themes suggest that HEIs need to acknowledge that ECRs and experienced researchers may encounter emotional challenges due to the nature of their research and that improved support mechanisms would be helpful across all levels of experience. Institutions should have processes that offer broader consideration of the impact of the proposed research on the researcher and the participant. These processes could rest within supervision and/or organizational systems for risk assessment specifically within the ethics approval process. Such systems need to be clear in terms of responsibility and therefore accountability.

Although experienced researchers may have some resilience to deal with the challenges of encountering challenging data, they could equally benefit from opportunities to share their experiences within a safe and supportive environment. Future research should consider the value of cross-discipline support networks, with the potential to include international dialogue on the challenges facing qualitative researchers globally.


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